

Shifting realities: Immigrant teacher transitions into early childhood settings in Aotearoa New Zealand

Abstract

Imagine you are an immigrant early childhood teacher... this article tells your story of transition and diversity. It interweaves tensions and complex realities and explores issues and concerns for immigrant teachers in the cultural places and relational spaces of early childhood settings. Based on teacher narratives and a post-structural discourse analysis, it suggests that immigrant teachers' realities are not always 'rich' or celebratory, but are often complex entanglements of struggle and contradictions. The article urges fresh considerations of early childhood relationships to allow for fluid, shifting identities and cultures – yours, ours, and the centre's.

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Shall we be, intimately and subjectively, able to live with the others, to live *as others*, without ostracism but also without leveling? (Kristeva, 1991, p. 2, emphasis in the original).

The happiness of tearing away

Imagine you are an immigrant early childhood teacher. You have recently moved to Aotearoa New Zealand, and are trying to make sense of your new realities here. Kristeva's opening quote, where she recognises the intimacy and private struggle of being the Other, of living amongst differences, concerns you and your new reality. It speaks also to the other 'non-foreign' teachers in your centre, and to ways to enhance engagements across all of our differences. Kristeva (1991) suggests the possibility that maybe we are all Other, that we could all live 'as others', strangers also to ourselves, and that we might all get on together without marginalizing practices that 'ostracise' or 'level'. Her quote represents the aim of this article: to highlight tensions that arise in the cultural places and relational spaces of Aotearoa early childhood environments, and to explicate tensions arising from well-intentioned aspirations and practices. Its particular concern is for immigrant teachers, like you, whose stories, alongside others, have informed my research.

You found it extremely hard to leave your homeland – you had never been this far away before – from your favourite places and the spaces that you loved. Even those places that had become difficult, towards the end, now, from a distance, remind you of the home that you left behind. Leaving your best friends and extended family has been particularly hard, and it still hurts to think of them. However, you are pleased, really, that you have been able to immigrate, with your husband and young children. Mostly, you are grateful to be here and to be able to begin to build a new life for your family. You have even managed to find a house to rent that is close to a few other immigrants from your country. How great it is to be able to speak your own language!

This article tells the story of your transition – a physical/emotional, personal/professional entanglement. Your journey illustrates some of the struggles and concerns of immigrant teachers, and highlights the complexities of shifting realities of transitions and belonging (Lewin et al., 2011). Informed by a post-structural discourse analysis (Arndt, 2012b), this story is a philosophical analytical narrative which unpacks Kristeva's ideal, in relation to orientations towards teachers who are Other, the foreigner, in early childhood settings. Your story demonstrates some of the heights of elation and the depths of turmoil and despair of transitioning into new times, places and spaces (Kristeva, 1991). In this article your story paints a picture of how Kristeva's challenge relates to you and your new teaching team. Furthermore, your story carries an argument for critical, sensitive, open orientations towards those that are Other, and for teacher orientations to break – rather than perpetuate – cycles of ostracism or leveling, as marginalizing practices of exclusion or non-recognition.

The Aotearoa context

Living amongst diversity can be difficult. Uncertainty and discomfort can arise where multiple cultures and lifestyles come together (Cherrington & Shuker, 2012; Lewin et al., 2011; Rhedding-Jones, 2001). In certain circumstances, diversity and difference and orientations towards the Other can even lead to widespread resentment and anxiety (Ansley, 2010; Kristeva, 1991; Rivalland & Nuttal, 2010). A number of factors impact on the cultural diversity in early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand, including a strong focus on our bi-cultural obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Ritchie, 2008; Ritchie & Rau, 2006). One of the factors that influenced you in deciding to immigrate was the favourable government policy (Immigration New Zealand, 2010, 2011). With the recent exponential growth in demand for children's spaces in early childhood settings (Dalli et al., 2011; Duhn, 2010; Hannigan, 2013), these policies supported your immigration, by elevating your profession on the Essential Skills in Demand list, and including beneficial conditions for your husband to work here. It was not easy for you, having to you're your possessions to raise the money for the journey, and giving up your job as a teacher in your local early childhood centre was not easy either: you miss the children, and you miss the familiarity. You were shocked to learn that you would have to continue studying here, and

that the New Zealand Teachers Council minimum requirement of a degree qualification does not recognise your recent qualification for teacher registration purposes (New Zealand Teachers Council, 2014). Reluctantly you have accepted the need to study alongside your new job, and paid the handsome sum for your studies as an international student. You are just thankful that you have a job.

It is your job that raises the key point of this article: the concern with orientations towards Others within early childhood teaching teams. In the critical multicultural and early childhood discourse diversity is often posited as a ‘problem’, that can be ‘managed’ and overcome by implementing particular strategies and practices (Chan, 2009; Ho, Holmes, & Cooper, 2004; May & Sleeter, 2010; Walsh, 2007). While specific strategies can be useful for specific moments, they do not address the underlying issues and orientations towards the diversity amongst individual teachers and within their teaching teams. A danger in focusing narrowly on ‘what works’ in one moment, and deriving from that a generalising approach, is that it can lead to normalising practices and expectations (Biesta, 2010), or the homogenising leveling that Kristeva (1991) speaks of, and rather than enhancing fairness can lead to superficial disconnectedness from the realities of your situation, or those that are similar to yours. An alternative view of diversity and difference, where it is seen as a natural part of our social existence (Baldock, 2010) seems crucial in considering a more open orientation towards otherness. Such an orientation might involve a conscious effort to integrate and allow for, rather than to eliminate or homogenise differences, and lead to an overall, more meaningful, increased commitment and sensitivity to your realities, and to those of your colleagues.

In *Te Whāriki* too there is a focus on inclusion and cultural diversity. Its ‘richness’ is valued in aspirations for teachers to nurture and support diversity amongst children and their families (Ministry of Education, 1996). Similarly to the critical multicultural discourse, there is little focus on encounters with, and the complexity of teachers’ cultural and linguistic diversity (Cherrington & Shuker, 2012; Freeman & Higgins, 2013; Harvey, 2011). You notice this in your new position. One day, you remember, you were sitting at the playdough table, with a three year old girl. She was rolling her dough into a flat shape. You

commented that it reminds you of *roti*, and explained to her that *roti* is the bread that you eat in your family, in your culture. When you looked up and noticed the disapproving expression on another teachers' face, you realized that the girl did not understand you, so you quickly apologised to her and made sure that you spoke to her dad when he picked her up. You apologised to him too – for using your home language with his daughter, just in case the girl used the word *roti* at home. The teachers in your centre had had a talk to you about that, they don't like it when you speak a language that they don't understand.

Unpredictability and uncertainty appear to determine your life now, sometimes you are not really sure what you can and can't do any more. Seen through the educational discourse you are immersed in a post or liquid modern political and social context, punctuated by little stability and short term strategies, commitments and goals (Bauman, 2009). For immigrants like you this only heightens what Kristeva (1991) sees on the one hand as the intoxicating freedom, and on the other hand the devastating loss, that you feel while learning how to be in these new spaces (Immigration New Zealand, n.d.; Lewin et al., 2011). At times you feel so vulnerable, exposed for the world to see your otherness, like a fish out of water, seeking a new place to swim. And at other times you feel quite comfortable, sitting, as you were at the playdough table – until you are reminded, by a colleague's expression, and once again relegated to your difference. While your colleagues clearly value your contributions, they don't always seem to realize how it hurts to be a nobody, tamed and normalised – often unintentionally – into a 'kiwi' teacher mold, masking what you know, love, believe in and do, from your previous teaching. What does it even mean, to be a teacher, you begin to wonder - and doubt creeps in to all that you do.

Struggling with new knowledges

What knowledge is valued depends on its context. This can create problems when, for example, knowledge of the other is promoted as fundamental to good teaching and learning (Ho et al., 2004; Ministry of Education, 1996; Walsh, 2007). What should we know? How should we know it? Processes, policies, rules and practices to obtain and work with the Other are examples of specific strategies alluded to earlier in this story. Todd (2004) contests this view of knowledge as a simple solution, by suggesting that it is unrealistic to

even imagine being able to claim to have knowledge of another's life. The complexity of 'knowing about another' was evident at the beginning of your studies. You were so nervous, at first, and then elated, when you met the other students and realized that many of them were from your home country. Your first class was an exuberant and excited affair! Introductions carried on far beyond the *mihi* instigated by the lecturer – immigration stories came bursting out: Why? When? Who with? Where from? And then moving to the new diaspora: Where do you live? Where do you work? How is it for you? The reciprocity and care in your encounters literally overflowed, from your eyes, head movements, body language, laughter, touching, and the silence and reverence as each of you told your story. You could 'feel' what each of you was saying, as it built on what Mohanty (2003) sees as your already shared historicised and localised commonalities.

Through your studies and your work you learn more about *Te Whāriki* and its strong support for the inclusion of diverse cultures, learning styles, languages and ways of being (Ministry of Education, 1996). The teachers in your teaching team discuss assessments, plan activities and arrange the learning environment, to nurture and cater for the children that come from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. This is the 'richness' that your supervisor is pleased that you are adding to. You wonder: How can you nurture children from different backgrounds, when you feel so un-nurtured yourself? How can you contribute 'richness', when you are not even really sure yourself, which parts of your culture you can, and which you can't share? Or do you even want to? No longer really part of your 'home' culture, but equally out of place here, you are quite confused about transitioning into the team, and often struggling, with emotions, desires and necessities. Already feeling this turmoil, you felt even more humiliated and isolated when you were asked to wear your colourful *sari*, to show off your 'beautiful' culture. Overwhelmed, you begin to realise that knowing about you is different from understanding you, or the cultural traditions and significance of your *sari*. You become increasingly uncertain about how to nurture children and their families in *their* cultural transitions. Grappling with these shifts, and with the fear of being 'put on show', exemplify the constantly shifting evolution of each of our inherited, complicated constructed selves (Kristeva, 1991; Mohanty, 2003), as hardly knowable to ourselves, and infinitely too complex to be knowable by another!

Continually challenged in the centre, you begin to question the values and beliefs that you think inform the ways you have lived your life and your teaching (Palmer, 1998), until now. You reconsider what you eat, even how you eat it, since one of the other teachers already told you that she ‘can’t stand’ the smell of your lunch. You buy new clothes that fit in, and you try to pray when the others don’t notice, masking your differences as much as possible. Underneath these overt differences you continue to struggle with the very different beliefs about teaching young children. You like the idea of children becoming confident contributors to their (increasingly diverse) society as *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) suggests, and see developing connections with children across differences as a reciprocally rewarding and terribly important relational and educational activity. However it seems that you understand these aspirations differently from your colleagues. Your nervousness about what other teachers might think unsettles how you play, talk and act with the children. You continually wonder, what counts as strangeness, stranger strangeness, or too strange strangeness – in your new environment?

Speaking out

You wish that you could speak about how you feel. But, as Kristeva (1991) reminds us, speaking can be scary. As a relational engagement speaking is variously argued for example as grounding and characterizing identity, as the carrier of familial traditions, and as an emblem of our cultural selves (Bammer, 1994; Besley & Peters, 2011; Council of Europe, 2014). In your own linguistic experiences, speaking with the other teachers, parents, even the children (especially when you are being observed), certainly feel like revelations of your self and identity, often quite a nauseating experience that has transformed your relationships with your new colleagues and setting (Ahmed, Castañeda, Fortier, & Sheller, 2003). The vulnerability of exposing yourself through your language, of sometimes being accepted, even causing delight, in your exotic pronunciation or linguistic turns, at other times makes you feel deeply inhibited, wishing you could hide behind a mask, or fit easily with the local way of speaking (Kristeva, 1991). But language is exceedingly more complex than that. Mostly the speaker can not even know the meaning that is made of what she says, since this depends on the interpretation by each listener, embedded in his/her own context, experiences

and understanding (Bakhtin, 1981; Todd, 2007). Engaging in speech or dialogue – as was suggested earlier, to ‘manage’ the ‘problem’ of diversity - could be seen rather as creating something of a complicated mosaic, of the past and present realities of speakers and listeners (Kristeva, 1986). From this perspective, any language engagements could become such risky, unknowable, nauseating, revelatory acts that, instead of leading to happy relationships within diversity, could lead to a complete aversion to speech and an escape into silence, instead (Todd, 2007).

You see that other immigrant teachers, like you, struggle with their use of language (Chan, 2011; Harvey, 2011; Li, 2007). You feel like you constantly have to be someone else, to fit in with the children and families, and even more so, with the other teachers. When you are together with other foreigner teachers you blossom – oh my, how the stories flow! Driven by an inexplicable urgency, you describe, laugh, cry and share, how you love the work that you do with the children, the things you miss from home (Silva, 2009). And you share stories of the other teachers in your centre, of often not knowing how to proceed with your teaching, in the face of uncertainty and fear.

In your new community

Throughout your story your life seems to become an increasingly tumultuous web, as you redefine and make sense of what you are, do, believe, know, want and feel! Perhaps it won’t surprise you then, to learn that the very idea of belonging to a community can also be seen in different ways. From one perspective community refers to a group of people, grounded in particular ideologies, geographical settings, or memberships, defined by beliefs, location or participation (Anderson, 1991, 2006; Bauman, 2009), as for example, in early childhood spaces. Drawing back to the orientation towards diversity as an everyday occurrence that we integrate into our lives - there is a further possibility. Todd (2004) suggests another way of seeing community, as an encounter, a “responsible mode of social togetherness” (p. 337). This view of community aims, through sensitive, ethical encounters, to overcome difference as an impediment to mutual understanding (Arndt, 2012a). Given the relational obstacles complicating your transition to your new team and setting, this view of community, as an act of encounter, suggests a crucial reorientation – for all teachers.

You notice how sometimes you are keen and eager to meet others, quite the social butterfly, ready to jump into relationships - even if they are fleeting. At other times, you become skeptical, participate only if you cannot avoid it, lonely and isolated with the deprivation, but unable to change (Kristeva, 1991). Understandings of community as acts of committed togetherness as suggested above, where “individuals ... commit themselves both to others, and to humanity” (p. 31) may provoke a reorientation in practice, towards responsible, socially just encounters with others through, rather than despite, their differences.

Without ostracism or leveling – towards a re-orientation

Kristeva’s provocation in her opening quote draws this story to a final reflection – since there is, as yet, no conclusion - for creating “just possibilities for living well together” (Todd, 2004, p. 338). Your story plays out the theoretical and philosophical perspectives that argue that we cannot claim to really know another’s life. You feel unheard, misunderstood, particularly in the face of policies and practices that indicate an underlying reliance on generalising expectations, such as: that all Others want to share their culture; that cultures can be separated, into the overt, visual, rich additions to a curriculum, without implicating the affective, that is the spiritual, emotional, meaningful – the difficult and unseen. These concerns open up another critical issue: the expectation to celebrate cultural differences (Ho et al., 2004; Ministry of Education, 1996). Your story reflects a changing but on-going trepidation, in the face of little effort to acknowledge, or adjust to work with, your struggles. It feels insensitively premature to suggest that you might be ready to celebrate your Otherness, your unknowable difference, when that is what you are carefully trying to minimise. Perhaps it changes daily. Perhaps you are ready on some days, and in some ways, to have your differences celebrated, and very far from it on others, and, very likely, you are not alone in that.

To live amongst difference thus remains a challenge. Kristeva (1991) suggests that it might mean removing ourselves from our familiar, comfortable ways or orientations, to cease considering ourselves as “unitary and glorious” but to instead discover some of our own “incoherences and ‘strangenesses’” (p. 2). By discovering strangenesses in ourselves, she

claims, we become more open to the other foreigner, and to other ways of living. For you, being a foreigner is both fearful and delightful, you compensate your mourning with the happiness of beginning this new life, tearing away into your new adventures. Your story emphasizes that undeniably a critical un-doing is necessary, before we all can ‘live as others’, you, and me, and the other teachers in your centre. Our unchallenged assumptions, ideals and expectations need unpacking, in our work towards ethical, sensitive and respectful encounters, to confront ostracizing and leveling practices that marginalize the Other in times of transition. Perhaps the tensions and concerns raised by your story may lead, precariously, to increasingly open responsible and committed encounters across and within the diversity in our teaching teams? And perhaps then we will celebrate the richness – in ways that honour all of our very complicated unknowable, often silent, otherness.

Epilogue:

A second person narrative method is applied in this story as a reflective provocation on findings from a post structural discourse analysis related to teacher otherness in early childhood education, and on interim findings from an ongoing philosophical project analysing multiple perspectives on the foreigner and foreignness. This narrative style draws on the use of analytical ethnographies as sites of exploration of social meaning and realities (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008), to invite and invoke new ways of knowing. It draws on the collective transition stories of immigrant early childhood student teachers between 2010 and 2012, of their experiences of otherness, as Others, in their new early childhood teaching teams.

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